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AUTHOR Storck, P. A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Fiction is one of the richest potential data resources available to the psychologist, but its study presents serious methodological problems. Chief among these problems is the question of whether instruments of measure designed for human subjects may be appropriate to studies of fictional characters who are drawn from the experience and observations of authors. To test the applicability of the activity and the disengagement theories of aging to elderly characters in fiction, six novels were selected from the Current Fiction Catalogue for evaluation on the Life Satisfaction Rating scale. All the novels portrayed a protagonist of 80 years of age or more. An equal number of male and female protagonists were represented in the selection. Results of the evaluation were compared with results from the human subjects' scores taken from the Kansas City Study of Adult Life. No significant differences were found in collective scores. While these findings appear to support the applicability of human quantitative evaluation instruments to fictional characters, other findings in the study provoked qualitative questions. This research suggests the desirability of an instrument which can isolate and measure an interpretative cognitive factor for subjects as well as for fictional characters. (Author)

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FICTION AND PSYCHOLOGY:
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ACTIVITY AND DISENGAGEMENT THEORIES OF AGING AS APPLIED TO ELDERLY PROTAGONISTS

P. A. Storck and D. A. Burnham

University of Texas at Dallas

M. B. Cutler

North Texas State University - Denton

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FICTION AND PSYCHOLOGY:

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ACTIVITY AND DISENGAGEMENT THEORIES

OF AGING AS APPLIED TO ELDERLY PROTAGONISTS

The relationship between literature and psychology has long been well established. The psychologist and the artist share the same field of study -- the human psyche -- though they may comprehend and present their knowledge in different ways (Paris, 1974). Whether the artist employs scientific concepts to explore the meaning of characters' behaviors and interaction, or the psychologist turns to a study of literary technique to search out nuances of human dynamics, the result is an enrichment of available data. By complementing one another, artist and psychologist can potentiate insight and lend order to the sometimes amorphous investigative process.

Until recent years, aging was a subject neglected by the majority of psychologists and writers. Yet perhaps in no other area has the artistic-psychological collaboration more spontaneously appeared as necessary and natural, for inherent in aging is the concept of life meaning and life value, and these have been the stuff of literature from the beginning (Ricciardelli, 1973). Clinical psychologists have recognized the value of literary work as both a diagnostic and therapeutic tool (Butler, 1977).

When systematic studies of the elerly population began, in the 1950's, focus was on the institutionalized elderly, with the result that many of today's conceptions about aging erroneously arise from the substrata of early generalizations about dependency, loss, and deterioration

(Pfeiffer, 1973). Though Havighurst and Albrecht (1953) postulated the necessity of social activity in maintaining the viability of late life, this "activity theory" was not widely accepted. Subsequently, Cumming and Henry's Disengagement Theory (1957) suggested that between the elderly (in normal settings) and society, a mutual withdrawal was effected. This theory, too, proved controversial. Neither Havighurst and Albrecht nor Cumming and Henry had accounted in their theories for those environmental and physiological factors which commonly impinge on the elderly, such as poverty, chronic disease and loss of significant persons and/or possessions (Tallmer, 1972; Dowd, 1975).

The purpose of this paper was to examine the applicability of either theory to characters in literature by means of a content analysis of novels dealing with an elderly protagonist.

METHOD

Instruments

The novels selected as instruments of analysis were literary works listed in the Current Fiction Catalog which met the controls of having an author over the age of fifty-five, written in English within the last forty years, whose single primary character was over the age of sixty-five. Seven novels met these controls; however, one was deleted in order to have an equal number of males and females for analysis. Fiction Catalog was chosen as the resource for instruments due to its policy and function of listing the best fiction in the English language.

The following novels, all by award-winning writers, are the literary works selected for use in the present study: Celebration, by

Harvey Swados (1974); The Eye of the Storm, by Patrick White (1974); Mrs. Parkington, by Louis Bromfield (1943); The Will of Magda Townsend, by Margaret C. Banning (1974); To Be a Pilgrim, by Joyce Cary (1958); and The Entrance to Porlock, by Fredrick Buechner (1970).

Scale

The present study sought insight into the phenomenon of aging from a life satisfaction frame of reference. The scale selected for use in the present study was the Life Satisfaction Rating (LSR) that was developed for use in the Kansas City Study of Adult Life by Neugarten, Havighurst & Tobin (1961). This scale was selected for use in the present study for the following reasons: It analyzes the concept of psychological well-being into a sufficient number of components to represent its complexity; and, it provides a means of measuring these components.

Rater Reliability

The LSR Ratings were made independently by the second author and a colleague after reading the selected instruments for analysis. The ratings were summed to obtain an overall rating with a possible range from five to twenty-five.

Of the thirty paired judgments made by the two raters, ninety percent showed exact agreement, while one hundred percent showed exact agreement or agreement within one step on the five-step scales. On the same basis, inter-judge agreement was lowest for Scale A (zest vs. apathy), 66.7%; 83.3% for Scale E (mood tone); and 100% for the remaining three scales, B, C and D (resolution and fortitude, congruence between

desired and achieved goals, and self-concept respectively). The lower inter-judge agreement for Scale A could be attributable in part to the steps in Scale A being less well defined perhaps than the steps in the remaining LSR scales.

Using the LSR means and standard deviations of the women and men from the original derivation study (Neugarten, et al., 1961) as a point of reference, $\bar{X}$ = 17.9; S.D. = 3.58; $\bar{X}$ = 17.5; S.D. = 4.04 respectively, Z scores (2-tailed) were computed for the fictional characters collectively as males and females, and as individual characters using a significance level of $p < .05$.

RESULTS

The findings of the present study indicate that the LSR score for the female fictional characters collectively ($\bar{X}$ = 17.2, S.D. = 1.48) did not differ significantly ($Z = -.36$, $p < .72$) from the results of the female human subjects' scores in the 1961 study ($\bar{X}$ = 17.9, S.D. = 3.58). The score for the male fictional characters ($\bar{X}$ = 16, S.D. = 1.09) was not significantly different ($Z = -1.37$, $p < .17$) from the 1961 findings ($\bar{X}$ = 17.5, S.D. = 4.04).

In examining the six literary subjects' individual LSR scores, it was found that the score of only one female fictional character, Elizabeth Hunter in White's The Eye of the Storm ($\bar{X}$ = 8, S.D. = .52), differed significantly ($Z = -2.37$, $p < .02$) from the 1961 study results for female subjects. Also, only one male fictional character's LSR score, Sam Lumen in Swados' Celebration ($\bar{X}$ = 11.5; S.D. = .82), showed significant difference ($Z = -3.47$, $p < .001$) from the 1961 male mean score. Both of

these fictional subjects' scores differed from the 1961 scores in that they were significantly lower than the 1961 results for subjects of the same sex.

The remaining two female fictional characters, Susie Parkington in Bromfield's Mrs. Parkington ($\bar{X}$ = 21.5; S.D. = .11) and Magda Townsend in Banning's The Will of Magda Townsend ($\bar{X}$ = 22.5; S.D. = .53) obtained LSR scores not significantly different (highest Z = 1.61, $p < .11$) from the 1961 female mean score. Similarly, the remaining two male fictional subjects, Tom Wilcher in Cary's To Be a Pilgrim ($\bar{X}$ = 16, S.D. = 1.2) and Peter Ringkoping in Buschner's The Entrance to Porlock ($\bar{X}$ = 11.5; S.D. = 1.2) obtained identical Z scores (Z = -.59) and did not differ significantly ($p < .56$) from the 1961 male mean scores.

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Insert Table I about here

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Table I presents the means and standard deviations of LSR scores for individual scales with possible ratings from 1 to 5. The scores in Scale D (self-concept) and in Scale E (mood tone) were lower than scores on Scales A, B and C for both females and males. Females scored lowest ($\bar{X}$ = 2.8) in mood tone (Scale E), while males scored lowest ($\bar{X}$ = 2.0) in self-concept (Scale D). Females and males obtained identical mean scores ($\bar{X}$ = 3.8) in zest vs. apathy (Scale A).

DISCUSSION

The research data does not support the disengagement theory and supports the activity theory only with qualifications which will be discussed later in this article. Fictional subjects in the present study and human subjects in the Neugarten et al. (1961) study obtained very similar mean scores, yet (although all fictional subjects were over eighty years of age) the novels' characters demonstrated great variation in levels of life satisfaction; both extremes of the scale were experienced. This is contrary to Cumming and Henry's plateau concept of later life:

> ... following a plateau in the late forties and through the fifties, there is a crisis, marked by anxiety, between sixty and sixty-five. After this, most people become more contented. Again in the seventies, there is a restlessness and irritability that, if not resolved by death, may lead, for the special few survivors, to a period of tranquility and satisfaction in very old age. (1961, p. 202)

Then examined individually, only two fictional subjects differed significantly from the mean scores of Neugarten, et al., subjects: Swados' Sam Turner and White's Elizabeth Hunter. Both were significantly lower in LSR ratings, i.e., their scores indicated considerably less satisfaction and contentment in their life outlook. Both characters were portrayed as narcissic and temperamental throughout youth and into old age.

No relation was found between self-concept and the variables of ego involvement, acceptance of responsibility or feelings of achievement. In general, subjects' ratings demonstrated feelings of (a) being old and weak; (b) having numerous physical complaints; (c) being regarded as

incompetent by others; and, (d) being a burden to others. These findings are difficult to explain in terms of either the disengagement or activity theory since all subjects were portrayed as financially independent, with families who were financially dependent on them.

Subjects' scores in Scale E also indicated feelings of loneliness and irritability. Irritability was related to physical and circumstantial changes.

Interestingly, a gender differential was discovered relative to authors but not to characters. Five of the novels were written by males, one by a female. Only in the latter novel was the major character described as positively related toward her children. In none of the novels written by male authors were relationships between major characters and their children positive or satisfactory; children were without exception portrayed as disappointing, weak, unprincipled, boring, lazy, or in some other fashion unworthy of positive feelings. This finding introduces the questions of to what extent gender affects LSR and whether gender is to be taken as a reflection of the author, or reflects the author's interpretation of a character.

The present study is not without its limitations. Its worth may lie in illustrating that subjective variables cannot be overlooked nor subsumed by objective variables. For example, it is primarily the emotion of the major character in each case that precludes allocating behavior to disengagement or activity theory. Regardless of the direction of impingement between an individual and the social context, an emotional meaning has been assigned to behavior which interferes with

the easy notion that behavior can be understood in the light of some common interpretation. Though it is evident that none of the characters under investigation in this study had disengaged in the existential sense implied by the Cumming and Henry theory, it seems equally obvious that the activity exhibited by each has served to some extent as a guage of self-distaste rather than as an indication of social participation.

It is suggested that future research addressing the question of social interaction as a function of age recognize the significant confounds that these theories embody. In addition to evidence that behavior has a multidimensional aspect, it seems necessary to suspect that the independence described by both the activity and disengagement theories will not stretch to the autonomy that is implied, nor will dependence, as described by either theory, allow the implication of reduction to basic survival need. The meaning of behavior must be sought both in its meaning to the individual character and in the interactive function it serves. The results of the present study are believed to illustrate that literature may serve as a rich source of data for further investigation.

TABLE I

Means and Standard Deviations of LSR Scores for Individual Scales

With Possible Ratings From 1 to 5

	Males		Females		Combined Scores	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
Scale A (Zest vs. Apathy)	3.8	.44	3.8	1.5	3.8	1.0
Scale B (Resolution)	3.6	.52	3.3	1.9	3.5	1.3
Scale C (Consistency of Goals)	3.0	.9	4.0	1.6	3.5	1.3
Scale D (Self-Concept)	2.0	1.6	3.3	1.0	2.7	1.4
Scale E (Mood Tone)	3.0	.9	2.8	1.6	2.9	1.2

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